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SUBJECT: IEC PRESIDENT ON THE TALIBAN AND ELECTIONS

REF: KABUL 2416

Classified By: Political Counselor Alan Yu; 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C NF) Dr. Azizullah Lodin, president of the Independent Elections Commission (IEC), on September 16 told PolCons that he has met several times with different Taliban elements over the past month, including as recently as September 15. These particular Taliban want to change their association from the Taliban to the government, but feel they need government security guarantees. If these groups leave the Taliban, Lodin explained, the Taliban will kill them. If they remain with the Taliban, the international coalition forces and the Afghan National Army will kill them. Lodin told these groups (none of whom spoke for senior Taliban leadership) that he will try to broker a meeting with President Karzai after the Eid holiday. "I have been friends with Karzai for thirty years," Lodin said.

¶2. (C NF) These meetings, Lodin hinted, are the background for his remarks at the September 11 IEC press conference, where he answered a journalist's question by saying the Taliban, including Mullah Omar, are welcome to participate as candidates in the elections as long as constitutional and election law requirements are met. The Ministry of Interior tells Lodin that the Taliban are now targeting government officials. Lodin says he has privately told Taliban leaders to stand back and "let the people go" to register and vote in the elections. Still, Lodin repeated that his chief concern about elections is that security will deter voter participation. "I think the people will not have the courage," he said.

¶3. (C NF) Lodin believes he must combine this "honesty" with "optimism" in his role as IEC president. He said he refuses to consider postponing elections, and cited Abraham Lincoln's stance during the U.S. Civil War as his model. Like other interlocutors, Lodin noted corruption, unmet expectations, and the "weakness" of the government - particularly as tied to coalition force civilian casualties - as principal election issues. For himself, he "is still a mujahid," and wants to see a new, strong, albeit democratic, leader for the future.

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